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TV: Program on Shooting of Pope

By ERIC PACE

SUCH striking, tragic, ominous images flash before the screen during tonight's NBC News documentary about Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turk who shot the Pope in May 1981, that it seems a shame to question the accompanying words.

After all, a film of a Vatican dignitary talking on-camera has unquestionable validity — it is what it is. And footage of a Turkish cafe or a Turkish funeral cortege is legitimate, too. That is what Turkish cafe-patrons and Turkish mourners really look like. But the network's words are more problematical. In promoting the program, NBC says Mr. Agca was supported by "the Turkish Mafia." That phrase, which also occurs in the script, has a catchy ring, and we know what is meant. But the fact is that Turks are not Mafiosi, and there is no evidence that Mafiosi wish harm to the Pope.

There is other loose use of words in and about the hour-long documentary, "The Man Who Shot the Pope — A Study in Terrorism," which NBC is airing at 10 P.M. New York time tonight. For example, the main point made in the program, a network press release indicates, is that evidence has been uncovered that "strongly suggests that Pope John Paul II was tar-

geted for assassination because of his close ties to the Solidarity movement in Poland; and, further, that the plot itself was developed with the knowledge, and perhaps assistance, of the Turkish Mafia, Bulgarian secret service and the Soviet K.G.B."

What the able NBC correspondent Marvin Kalb actually says at the outset of the program is less confident-sounding: After nine months of digging, "NBC News has accumulated a great deal of evidence, some of it, to be sure, circumstantial, linking the attempted murder to the political and diplomatic needs of Red Square. A Soviet connection is strongly suggested, but it cannot be proved."

Further into the program, Mr. Kalb says Mr. Agca tarried in Sofia, Bulgaria, in 1980 and contends that, "No foreigner, especially a known Turkish terrorist on the lam, could spend seven weeks in the best hotels in Sofia without the knowledge and approval of the Bulgarian secret service."

Later he asks rhetorically whether Bulgarian intelligence could have aided Mr. Agca "without the knowledge of the Soviet K.G.B.?" "Only if you believe in fairy tales," is his own reply.

But what Mr. Kalb winds up saying, near the end of the program, has a less knowing ring: "According to Vatican, American, European and Turkish intelligence, the evidence suggests the possibility that the Russians hatched the plot against the Pope, or, at a minimum, knew about the plot and did nothing to stop it."

Mr. Kalb rightly says "this possibility" is "shocking," and he reports that the pope's "closest aides" — whom he does not identify — say he believes "that the Russians were behind Agca's attempt to kill him and that they may try again."

NBC clearly deserves praise for as-

signing Mr. Kalb and another intelligent, seasoned correspondent, Bill McLaughlin, to its investigative project, working with Anthony Potter, the program's executive producer.

The detail they report and show about Mr. Agca's life and peregrinations through various Turkish and European cities is in part fascinating — the electronic-age equivalent of an Eric Ambler thriller-novel — even if the program does not come up with proof that ties Moscow to Mr. Agca.

But it seems a bit overzealous to promote the outcome as being rather more conclusive than — as appears by the program's end — it actually was, even if those unnamed sources should be correct in asserting that the Pope himself believes that Moscow was indeed behind the attempt.

To be sure, what to do with disappointingly scanty evidence is a perennial problem for news executives who administer investigative undertakings. They must decide whether to make public what their investigators have found — or to wait a while longer in hopes that something weightier will be turned up. But the trouble with waiting is that another news organization may decide to unload its findings in the meantime.

As it happens, the NBC program is being aired five weeks after Claire Sterling, an American journalist, reported in the Reader's Digest that Western European officials whom she had talked to assumed "that the Pope must have been shot because he is the spiritual father of Poland's Solidarity trade union movement."

She said there was Soviet backing for the shooting, through Bulgarian intelligence. But Moscow Radio said: "The absurdity and unfoundedness of this claim are obvious."

Soviet comment is not included in the NBC show.